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CHAUCER'S PORTRAIT OF CRISEYDE

In an article published in *Modern Language Notes* for 1904 (XIX, 235) Professor G. P. Krapp inquires why Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* (ed. Skeat, V, 813-4) should have been so ungallant as to bestow upon his otherwise beautiful heroine the single defect of knit eye-brows:

"And, save hir browes ioyneden y-fere,
Ther nas no lak, in ought I can espeyen."

As Professor Krapp intimates, the question is pertinent not merely upon chivalrous but also upon artistic grounds. Mr. Krapp contends that as an historian, anxious only to preserve the truth of fact, Chaucer might well have pictured Criseyde as he has done but as a poet, intent solely upon an artistic ideal, his representation demands explanation. And this explanation the author of the article in question feels himself not in a position to supply.

If we assume with Mr. Krapp that Chaucer is proceeding with an artistic ideal in view, then indeed we must admit that the poet has blundered. Even on general grounds we should expect an artist—particularly such an artist as Chaucer—to picture a beautiful woman and call her Criseyde rather than to paint Criseyde as she was, even though her ill-looks were limited to one feature only. Indeed the very singleness of the defect centers attention upon it. Still more should we expect him to refrain from gratuitous animadversion upon this imperfection. For an unbecoming feature, however slight, cannot fail to be conspicuous when attention is explicitly called to it. But it is not merely on general grounds that we should expect Chaucer to refrain from admitting any blemish in the appearance of his heroine. For, as Professor Kittredge has pointed out (*Chaucer and His Poetry*, pp. 128 ff.),¹ the poet is at evident pains to exonerate the erring Criseyde, to extenuate her faults, and to present her as an object for the utmost pity of the reader. This purpose, as Mr. Kittredge observes,

¹ Notwithstanding the fact that two elaborate studies of the character of Criseyde had already been published, one by Cook, A. S., *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XXII, 531 ff., and the other by Root, R. K., *The Poetry of Chaucer*, pp. 105 ff.

Chaucer explicitly acknowledges in a passage that follows hard upon the one just quoted:

"Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde
 Ferther than the story wol devyse.
 Hir name, alas! is publissed so wyde,
 That for hir gilt it oughte y-now suffyse.
 And if I mighte excuse hir any wyse,
 For she so sory was for hir untrouthe,
 Y-wis, I wolde excuse hir yet for routhe."
 (V, 1093-99.)

Now if Chaucer feels thus tenderly toward his heroine, why should he endow her with a feature not calculated certainly to contribute to such a feeling on the part of poet or reader? We pity those we admire. Imagine an Effie Dean with squint eyes or still worse a Scott who should deliberately call attention to the fact! Elsewhere to be sure Chaucer realized the desirability of limiting himself to an exclusively complimentary representation of his heroine. The various references to Criseyde's good looks scattered throughout the *Troilus* amply bear out the poet's assertion that save for her eye-brows she suffered from no lack of comeliness. How gloriously does he everywhere enlarge upon her schedule of beauty! When she makes her first appearance in the poem we read:

"In al Troyes citee
 Nas noon so fair, for passing every wight
 So aungellyk was hir natyf beautee,
 That lyk a thing immortal semed she,
 As doth an hevenish parfit creature,
 That doun were sent in scorning of nature." (I, 100-105.)

Again observe that Chaucer makes direct use of her physical beauty as a means of increasing our pity for her when she is forced to abandon Troilus:

"Hir ounded heer, that sonnish was of hewe,
 She rente." (IV, 736-7.)

Moreover the detailed portrait of Criseyde, from which the passage under consideration is quoted, abounds, both before and after that passage, in complimentary descriptions:

"Criseyde mene was of her stature,
 Ther-to of shap, of face, and eek of chere,
 Ther mighte been no fairer creature.
 And ofte tyme this was hir manere

To gon y-tressed with hir heres clere
Doun by hir coler at hir bak behinde,
Which with a threde of gold she wolde binde." (V, 806-12.)

"But for to speken of her eyen clere,
Lo, trewely, they writen that hir syen,
That Paradys stood formed in her yēn.
And with hir riche beautee ever-more
Strof love in hir, ay which of hem was more." (V, 815-19.)

It cannot be gainsaid therefore that in attributing to Criseyde a feature avowedly unbecoming Chaucer has allowed himself to be betrayed into the admission of an attribute not only inconsistent with what he elsewhere says of his heroine but also singularly at variance with the purpose of the poem. Evidently from the aesthetic point of view Chaucer has, as Krapp alleges, committed an error and it remains to be seen whether we can discover a reason for that error.

It cannot be pleaded in defence of the poet that he was misled by bad example and strayed from the path of art because those authors from whom he derived the materials of his *Troilus*, had so strayed before him. Boccaccio, his principal source, omits all mention of knit eye-brows in his portrait of Criseida in the first canto of the *Filostrato* (st. 27) as well as elsewhere in that poem. Joseph of Exeter, from whose portraits of Troilus (vv. 60-4), Diomedes (vv. 124-7), and Briseis (vv. 156-62) in the fourth book of his *De Bello Trojano* (ed. A. J. Valpy, *Scriptores Latini*, London, 1825) Chaucer has, as shown by Professor Root (*Chaucer's Dares* in *Modern Philology*, XV, 3ff.), extracted the larger portions of his personal descriptions of his three protagonists in the fifth book of the *Troilus* (vv. 799-840), is in like manner completely silent as respects the married brows of Briseis.² Of the four authors whom the English poet

² Root's suggestion that Chaucer's derogatory reference to Criseyde's eye-brows might be due to a misapprehension of Joseph's 'umbreque minoris delicias' whereby he understood 'the delights of lesser shadow' to mean 'a shadow of lesser delight' is, as he himself acknowledges, not at all probable. Neither the construction of the Latin words as they stand nor the context in which they occur—which demands either *umbre* (a genitive, as we have it) or *umbras* (an accusative plural)—would allow such a supposition. Nor would Root's parallel from Claudian allow it, in which the expression 'umbra minor'—not 'umbra' alone—appears to mean eye-brows (i.e.) lesser shadow, as contrasted with 'umbra major,' greater shadow, i.e. hair of the head).

consulted in composing his *Troilus and Criseyde* but two remain, viz. Benoit de Ste. More and Guido delle Colonne. Both these writers to be sure give Briseida knit eye-brows and both subjoin an adverse comment thereupon:

"Mais les sorcilles li joignerent
Que auques li mesaveneient" (*Roman de Troie* ed. L. Constans, vv. 5279-80),

"Sed [briseida fuit] superciliis iunctis quorum iunctura dum multa pilositate tumesceret modicam inconuenientiam presentabat."
(*Historia Trojana*, Strassburg, 1486, sig. e. 2, rect., 2, 16-8.)

But it must be borne in mind that Benoit and Guido maintain towards their heroine an attitude diametrically opposed to that maintained by Chaucer toward his. Instead of attempting to condone her offence they reproach and upbraid her for it. Even before Briseida has left Troy both authors have so far gauged the fickleness of their heroine as to feel themselves already justified in predicting her defection to Diomedes and in uttering in anticipation thereof a prolonged diatribe on the inconstancy of women.³ Again she has no sooner reached the Greek camp than she finds, they say, much that pleases her. Benoit allows her just three days in which to remain faithful to Troilus:

"Anceis que [el] veie le quart seir
N'avra corage ne voleir
De retourner en la cité.
Mout sont corage tost müé,
Poi veritable e poi estable;
Mout sont li cuer vain e muable.
Por col comperent li leial:
Sovent en traient peine e mal." (*Roman de Troie*, vv. 13859-66.)

Guido, who in the matter of moral censure always goes Benoit one better, claims that her change of heart began immediately:

"Nondum illa [prima] dies ad horas declinauerat vespervas cum iam briseida suas recentes mutauerat voluntates et vetera proposita sui cordis et iam magis sibi succedit ad votum esse cum grecis quam fuisse hactenus cum troianis. Jam nobilis troili amor cepit in sua mente tapesce et tam breui hora repente sic subito facta volubilis ceperat in omnibus variari. Quid est ergo quod dicatur de constantia mulierum? Quarum sexus proprium in se habet vt repentina fragilitate eorum proposita dissoluantur et hora breuissima muta-

³ *Roman de Troie*, vv. 13429-56; *Historia Trojana* sig. i, 2, 27—vers. I, 7.

biliter variantur. Non enim cadit in homine varietates et dolos earum posse describere, cum magis quam dici possint, sint earum volubilia proposita nequiora." (*Historia Trojana* sig. i, 3, rect, I, 41-2, 15.)

Thus the object of Benoit and of Guido was not, like that of Chaucer, artistic but didactic. A disfigured Briseida must accordingly have proved indifferent, if not actually serviceable, to their design.⁴ But with Chaucer the case was otherwise. A physical defect that might readily pass unchallenged when admitted by authors whose purpose it is to hold their heroine up to ignominy and contempt, cannot fail to excite surprise when allowed by an author whose object it is to enlist the reader's sympathy for his heroine. Evidently therefore we cannot throw the initial blame for Chaucer's artistic lapse back upon the shoulders of his French and Latin predecessors. Nor can it be maintained that Chaucer merely copied inadvertently a representation appropriate enough for their purpose but out of keeping with his own. The English poet is not in the habit of falling asleep in this manner—particularly in the case of a heroine. Much more probable is it that we have to do with an instance in which Chaucer sought above all else to comply with the facts of history and indeed for the very reason that Criseyde was his heroine felt it incumbent upon him to paint her as she was—not as she might have been. In matters historical—or supposedly historical—a scrupulously conscientious fidelity to sources was, as we know, a characteristic of the author of the *Troilus and Criseyde* no less than of his contemporaries. Moreover in the telling of the Trojan story the English poet had peculiar reasons to sacrifice art to accuracy. For had he

⁴ Serviceable if we may suppose that the disapprobation visited upon knit eye-brows by Benoit and Guido was due to the fact that they regarded them less as a mark of physical ugliness than as a sign of moral obliquity. Countenance is given to this interpretation by the example of Benoit's eleventh century Byzantine contemporary Johannes Tzetzes who in his *Ante-Homerica* (vs. 355-7) represents Briseis as one (to translate freely) 'whose sweet smiles did not disguise the fact that she possessed knit eye-brows.' Hamilton, G. L. (*Modern Language Notes* XX, 80), to be sure, while admitting moral disapprobation on the part of Tzetzes, denies it on the part of Benoit. But certainly Benoit's attitude towards women in general and towards Briseida in particular is sufficiently censorious to justify amply the conclusion that he too regarded Briseida's knit eye-brows as constituting a sort of bar sinister in her temperamental endowment.

not in the history of Dares Phrygius, whom he twice cites in the *Troilus* (I, 146; V, 1771), the record of a personal participant in the Trojan war and an eye-witness of that event (*De Excidio Trojae Historia*, ed. Meister, F., cap. XII)? And was it not with a view to providing special authentication for his portraits of the Trojans (cap. XII) and of the Greeks (cap. XIII) that Dares thus particularizes with regard to his identity? For why otherwise should he have placed the foregoing specifications with regard to himself immediately in front of his list of portraits and why in particular should he have been so careful to explain the precise occasions upon which he beheld these Greeks and Trojans, viz. partly during periods of war and partly during intervals of peace? Particularly valuable, of course, must have been his testimony with regard to the exact appearance of Briseida since she was a Trojan and he had fought on the side of the Trojans (cap. XLIV). Now this information respecting Dares, despite his two citations of that author, Chaucer did not glean directly from the *Historia*. There is no reason to suppose that he ever possessed direct access to the annals of the Phrygian soldier (cf. Young, K., *The Origin and Development of the Story of Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer Society, 1908, p. 106, n, 2). Indeed had he enjoyed such access he could hardly have been led into his present blunder. For while Dares records 'supercilia juncta' among the various attributes that go to make up his portrait of Briseida (cap. XIII), he abstains altogether from passing any derogatory comment thereupon. Nor can we doubt that he intended it as a mark of beauty. Such was the interpretation it regularly bore among the ancients (cf. Fürst, J., *Philologus* LXI, 387) and Dares, if not himself an ancient,⁶ was certainly dependent upon antique authors (cf. my *Dares and Dictys*, Furst and Co., Baltimore, 1907, p. 5. n. 3). Moreover since all the other specifications with which this of the joined eye-brows is associated are without exception complimentary, there can be no doubt that this one as well was intended by the author to be so construed. In any case the absence of any derogatory reference to knit eye-brows

⁶ Since Dictys is now known to have been a Greek author, presumably of the age of Nero, there is no good reason to doubt that his fellow author Dares was likewise a Greek of about the same date.

on the part of Dares would have enabled Chaucer to save himself the necessity of adverse comment, had he enjoyed opportunity to consult that author directly. Young has, however, shown (op. cit. pp. 105ff.), by the adduction of a number of verbal parallels, that it was in all probability Benoit and Guido whom Chaucer had in mind when he cites Dares (I, 146; V, 1771).⁶ Both Benoit and Guido refer constantly to Dares throughout their respective histories and it would accordingly appear that in the two foregoing citations Chaucer is seeking merely, in compliance with a practice well nigh universal in the Middle Ages, to win superior authority for his recital by naming an ulterior rather than an immediate source. But whether or no it may have been Benoit and Guido to whom Chaucer is referring under the name of Dares, it was certainly from them that he derived his unflattering allusion to the knit eye-brows

⁶ It is possible, though by no means probable, that it is Joseph of Exeter rather than Benoit or Guido to whom Chaucer is referring under the name of Dares. The two particulars for which Chaucer cites the authority of Dares are the capture of Troy (I, 146) and the prowess of Troilus (V, 1771). The capture of Troy is treated at length by Benoit (vv. 25945-6590) and by Guido (sig. m, 5 vers. 2, I—n. I, rect. I, 29). It is treated also as Root observes (op. cit., p. 5) by Joseph of Exeter in the sixth book of his history. Since, however, Chaucer passes over the incident in silence, as lying outside the scope of his poem, it would be impossible to determine to whom he is here referring. To the bravery of Troilus, however, which naturally lies very much within the province of his poem, Chaucer devotes no inconsiderable amount of attention (I, 482-3, 1074; III, 1775; V, 1755-6, 1802-4) and in one instance at least, as Young has shown (p. 130), in close conformity with Benoit and Guido, who likewise have much to say of the exploits of Troilus (*Roman de Troie* vv. 19955-20042; 20451-620; *Historia Trojana* sig. k, 5, vers. I, 16—6, vers. I, 22; l. I, rect. 2, 19—vers. I, 34). As to whether or no Joseph of Exeter, who though he omits altogether the story of his love for Briseis has touched in at least two passages upon the exploits of Troilus, deals with them in a manner at all closely resembling Chaucer's, the author of the article in question says nothing. In so far as the Troilus is concerned that critic had, of course, set before himself simply the task of pointing out the indebtedness of Chaucer to Joseph in so far only as regards the portraits. It is therefore a little unfortunate that he should have selected for the title of his article *Chaucer's Dares*. For while that title, as the writer remarks (p. 5), was not unnaturally suggested by the occurrence, in early mss. of Joseph's history, of the title *Frigii Daretis Ylias* in place of the more modern title *De Bello Trojano*, it nevertheless conveys the impression that the author has prejudged his case and means to go so far as to claim that it is Joseph of Exeter rather than Benoit and Guido that Chaucer has in mind when he uses the name Dares.

of Criseyde. They alone of Chaucer's sources make uncomplimentary reference to this feature and make it, as the above quotations indicate, in close agreement with Chaucer. Benoit (vv. 5093-106) and Guido (sig. e; 1, vers., 1, 33-44) are, moreover, careful to repeat Dares's specifications with regard to the exceptional opportunities he enjoyed of observing the exact appearance of the Greeks and Trojans whose portraits he gives and to follow him in placing these specifications immediately in front of the portraits and in explaining them as introduced for the express purpose of authenticating the portraits. There can be but little doubt therefore that the specifications in question were interpreted by Chaucer as placing the portraits in a class by themselves—as the features of his work in which Dares took the greatest pride and sought to render the most accurate. What more natural then than that the English poet, anxious to retain intact every item in a portrait of Criseyde attested by so well accredited a witness as Dares, should have felt himself under obligation to repeat, in the interests of historical truth, the construction placed, as he supposed by Dares, upon a feature so prominent in the physiognomy of his heroine as were her eye-brows. Only by assuming an unlimited respect on Chaucer's part for the authority of Dares Phrygius can we explain why, when provided both by Boccaccio and by Joseph of Exeter with ample excuse for rejecting a feature so out of harmony both with the complimentary attributes which he elsewhere has exclusively ascribed to his lady and with the evident artistic demands of his subject, Chaucer should have preferred to retain it rather than 'falsen [his] matere.'

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